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Laos

Country Profile

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PROFILES

LAOS

Lao People's Democratic Republic

HISTORY

The first united kingdom of Laos, Lan Xang, was established in June 1354, when Fa Ngum was crowned king. The kingdom covered much of modern Thailand. In 1690, Lan Xang fell to a series of invasions and was split into three kingdoms. It was not reunited again until 1899, when France joined upper and lower Laos as part of French Indochina. Laos gained official independence from France in 1949, but the growth of communist and anti-communist factions prevented the formation of any unified government until 1975.

A protracted civil war broke out in 1960 between the Pathet Lao, a communist faction headed by the North Vietnamese, and government forces backed by the Thai and South Vietnamese. In 1973, a ceasefire was reached, and a new coalition government was formed. The Pathet Lao gained control in 1975, after a series of communist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Pathet Lao established the first Lao People's Democratic Republic.

LANDMINES/UXO OVERVIEW

Laos is not known to produce or export AP mines. It is thought that Laos does maintain a stockpile of mines, but the amount is unknown. There is no evidence of recent use of AP mines by Lao-tian military. Although there are AP



mines present in Laos, the primary threat to civilians is UXO. Bombing during the Indochina War, especially from 1964-1973, resulted in the release of tons of cluster bomb units that did not explode on impact as planned. There is an unknown number of UXO in Laos, estimated by various sources to be between 500,000 and several million. Handicap International (HI) reported in 1997 that over 3,800 villages, with a population of 1.3 million, have been affected by UXO and mines. The serious landmine problem causes not only the risk of causality, but it also affects Laos by adding time, expense and hazard to new economic development. Land denial and barriers to development are pressing issues. The UXO problem has profound effects on food production, infrastructure development, water and sanitation, school and hospital additions, and other important economic development.

CASUALTIES

A survey done by HI in early 2000 stated that from 1973-1996, there were 1,171 casualties from landmine accidents and 9,473 victims of UXO accidents. During the first four years after the war, an average of three accidents occurred per day. The number has now dropped to an average of 240 accidents per year.

DEMINEING

In 1996, the government established a national office, the UXO Lao, to coordinate UXO clearance and awareness and implement a national UXO strategy and demining projects. UXO Lao is one of the nation's largest employers, with over 1,000 employees. There are several programs involved in mine/UXO clearance in Laos. MAG, HI, NPA, World Vision Australia, Gerbera and MilSearch all support demining efforts in Laos. In 1999, 622 hectares of land were cleared, and 90,000 mines were destroyed. In addition, 178,846 people were provided with UXO awareness information. More than 951,000 people benefited from the operations. UXO Lao had set target goals for 2000 to clear 1,005 hectares of land in 857 villages, destroying approximately 100,000 UXO. They also have plans to visit more than 759 villages with mine awareness programs for over 190,000 people.

REALITY CHECK

A press release from the Lao Human Rights Council Inc. details reports in Laos that the Russian and Vietnamese governments have been supplying the Lao Communist government with "biological and chemical weapons." The weapons have been used to kill Hmong and Loatians in Laos since the end of the Vietnam War. Reports indicate that the Lao Communist government has used biological and chemical weapons to kill more than 50,000 people in Laos since 1975.

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